

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN AND OUT OF PRISON

JEFF B. DALTON
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

Servant leadership is a subject that can be applied to many aspects of life. Business and religious applications abound on this topic. However, prison opportunities for servant leadership are very seldom discussed. I had the opportunity to serve a 33-month federal prison sentence and a 16-month state prison sentence. These sentences gave me the opportunity to observe how the concept and application of servant leadership during prison life enabled me and others to change our lives. Continuing to serve during parole and after completion can help make the transition to a normal life much easier. This paper will present the argument, through studies and personal observation, that prison can be an opportunity for change and that servant leadership is available and applicable in a prison setting, as well as outside of prison.

My high school diploma was received from South Park Academy. This is a part of the Canyons School District at the Utah State Prison. I was able to walk and wear a cap and gown for my graduation ceremonies. I was also privileged to have my mother and a sister attend the ceremony. The ceremony consisted of inmates from different parts of the prison. It

was similar to most graduations, except for the 100 or so correctional officers and SWAT team members also in attendance. This was the culmination of several months of attending school for four days a week. Receiving my high school diploma opened several doors for me to become a servant leader in prison.

Once I graduated from high school, I had the opportunity to volunteer as a teaching assistant (TA) for life skills classes. Life skills classes are something that every inmate is required to take to get out of prison. Each inmate is evaluated by a case manager when first arriving at the prison. The case manager tells you what classes you need to attend so you can get out of prison. These classes include subjects such as financial literacy, thinking for a change, communication skills, and victim impact. According to Richel (2017), classes like financial literacy can help inmates become invested in their financial future. One study conducted by Antonio and Crossett (2016), examined a cognitive life skills course, demonstrated a recidivism reduction of 24% in a control group and a 31% reduction among high risk offenders. This study is evidence of the impact life skills classes can have on inmates.

Becoming a TA was a bit of an oxymoron. I received three days of intense training from a correctional officer (CO) who had a master's degree in education. He was an amazing teacher, and I never could figure out what he was doing in corrections. When I was assigned my first class, I found out there was no one to assist because I was the teacher. There were two of us with no experience assigned to teach the class. We had both just done the training together, along with about ten other inmates. We received a teaching manual and away we went. These life skills classes gave me my first opportunity to understand what it means to be a servant leader. Volunteering to be a life skills TA allowed me to help other inmates. Over the span of a little more than a year, I taught several courses, each of which lasted for eight or nine weeks. I tried to teach two classes per term. I found great satisfaction in teaching these classes. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to begin to understand the concept of servant leadership. It inspired me to want to continue my education after release. Teaching these classes also instilled in me the desire to become a teacher and a lifelong learner. I also discovered that I am a fairly respectable teacher.

Education is vital to reducing recidivism rates. A lack of education for ex-prisoners makes the task of finding employment very difficult. The Utah State Prison has an education department that is part of the Canyons School District. All inmates are encouraged to finish high school through this program. A five-year study involving 6394 ex-prisoners from the Indiana Department of Corrections concluded that age, level of education, and post-release employment were the greatest predictors of recidivism. These findings held true across race. African Americans or Caucasians, the results were very similar (Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2015). This study shows how important education is for ex-prisoners.

After receiving my diploma and teaching the life skills courses, I was looking for more ways to serve. I enjoyed teaching and decided to help with the education department. I knew they had tutors, so I signed up to become one. Several inmates enrolled in school had learning disabilities. A U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (2015), concluded that 40% of females and 31% of males in prison have some sort of disability. We can infer from these percentages that tutoring is an essential way to help and serve inmates, especially those who have learning disabilities. Helping other inmates become educated was a great opportunity to apply servant leadership.

Another opportunity I had to learn servant leadership while in prison was in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) family history room. This facility had ten computers that enabled inmates to index names for the Family History Indexing Program. These computers were available for about three hours each day. There was always a race to get down to the family history room to do indexing. With only a limited number of computers and 400 inmates, the daily race was on! Not all of the 400 inmates wanted to index, but there were plenty that did. Inmates could also work on their own family history, and many did. The indexing was not done online. The church volunteers would bring the program and take it with them each week to submit the work done by the inmates. I was indexing between 1,400-2,200 names each month. This was not only a great opportunity to serve, but also a chance to lead. Being able to serve and find some happiness in prison set some people apart as leaders.

In the drug program I participated in, there were opportunities for servant leadership through positions called peer leaders. These peer leaders served as representatives for each dorm. There were eight dorms with 50 men per dorm. Each dorm was assigned four peer leaders. One peer leader would be the group rep and the others would help him conduct meetings and attend weekly meetings with staff. The men selected for these jobs had to learn to become servant leaders. Many of them already were, which is why they were chosen. There were also opportunities to serve in the music room. Individuals who knew how to play guitar taught other inmates guitar lessons. These men also put on concerts and many were very talented. They demonstrated servant leadership by teaching guitar lessons and performing.

Many of the people that work for the prison system practice servant leadership. Each of the eight dorms in the drug program had a therapist. These therapists were great examples of servant leaders. It was their job to work with inmates, and the ones I interacted with were definitely trying to serve and help keep inmates from returning to prison. Some of the correctional officers were also examples of servant leaders in the way they dealt with inmates. The people in the education department were what I would define as servant leaders. It is a tough environment, but these teachers were tireless and patient in trying to help inmates earn a high school diploma.

Once I was released on parole, I decided I wanted to continue my education. I had found that being a servant leader was very fulfilling, and I wanted to find ways I could continue to help others. I signed up for school and began attending classes to earn a Substance Use Disorder Counseling (SUDC) certificate. I received the certificate after two years of school but decided to continue my education and work towards becoming a therapist. I was attending school, but felt something missing in my life. I attended church on a regular basis and after I had been out for about ten months, I was privileged to receive a temple recommend that gave me access to LDS temples. I was doing good things, but felt that I should be doing more to help others. I went to a few LDS 12 Step meetings with a young man I was mentoring. After attending some of these, I felt impressed to become a facilitator for the program. I had attended

LDS 12 Step meetings in prison. The spirit at these meetings was always a positive thing in my life. I contacted the missionary couple in charge of the Utah County North Mission and became a facilitator for LDS 12 Steps. This has been an opportunity for servant leadership that brings me great joy. I was a facilitator for two years and was then asked to be a missionary for the LDS 12 Step Addiction Recovery Program. I am humbled by the opportunities I receive to serve men and women who are trying to change their lives. I currently serve in two meetings each week. I am a sponsor for people who are struggling with all kinds of addictions. My own past drug addiction allows me to help these people know that they can change their lives. I give people hope by sharing my experiences. After the despair and anguish of being incarcerated in county jails, state prison, and federal prison, I try to let them know that change is always possible. To me, this is what servant leadership is about—helping others through their own issues and being a positive influence in the world.

This privilege of being a servant leader took me a long time to grasp. In the few short years that I have been practicing my version of it, I have been presented with some great opportunities to share. I was released from prison on parole April 1, 2014—just over three years ago. The practice of servant leadership has brought about great change in my life. I am a 59-year-old junior (almost a senior) at UVU, with a 3.92 GPA, majoring in psychology. I want to become a therapist and help other people. I have reconciled with all my family and enjoy their company often. On several occasions, I have been asked to speak about my experiences. I have spoken at a LDS 12 Step Fireside and a Brigham Young University single adult ward. I have been asked to speak in LDS Stake Conferences twice. I have spoken to youth groups. These speaking engagements are a great privilege and opportunity for me to share what I have learned about servant leadership. The theme of my talk is always about serving others. I know that serving others puts you in a leadership position. Stephen Covey stated it this way: “As you expand your influence by inspiring others to find their voice, you increase your freedom and power of choice to solve challenges and serve human needs; you learn how leadership becomes a choice, not a position...” (Covey, 2006, p. 6). This is the servant leadership I am striving for. I want to help others, serve human needs, give hope

to those who have lost it, and lead by example. My life has changed in ways I could never have imagined five years ago. Servant leadership has brought me more joy and happiness than I ever knew existed. This is the path I choose!

WORKS CITED

- Antonio, M.E., & Crossett, A. (2016). Evaluating the effectiveness of the national curriculum and training institute’s “cognitive life skills” program among parolees supervised by Pennsylvania’s board of probation & parole. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 42(3), 514–532. doi:10.1007/s12103-016-9366-2
- Covey, S.R. (2006). Servant leadership: Use your voice to serve others. *Leadership Excellence Essentials*, 23(12), 5-6.
- Richel, K. (2017). Simulating money management and life skills with prison populations. *Journal of Extension*, 55(1), p. 1.
- Lockwood, S. K., Nally, J. M., Ho, T., & Knutson, K. (2015). Racial disparities and similarities in post-release recidivism and employment among ex-prisoners with a different level of education. *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, 2(1), 16-31. doi:10.15845/jper.v2i1.703.
- U.S. Department of Justice (2015). *Special report: Disabilities among prisoners and jail inmates, 2011-2012*.